Socio-Religious Tolerance: Exploring the Malaysian Experience

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Abstract - This article will discuss the history of religious tolerance, its definitions and experience of Malaysian society. The brief discussion of the history of toleration starts from the Cyrus the Great of Persia 500 years BCE until this century. Then it continues with the debate on the definitions of tolerance. The discussion follows by exploring everyday life of the Malaysian society in which it seems that there are contradictory situations happen in Malaysia. From one pole, there are evidence of a highly tolerated society, whereby from the other pole, the situation is totally opposite.

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Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:

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Abstract - This article will discuss the history of religious tolerance, its definitions and experience of Malaysian society. The brief discussion of the history of toleration starts from the Cyrus the Great of Persia 500 years BCE until this century. Then it continues with the debate on the definitions of tolerance. The discussion follows by exploring everyday life of the Malaysian society in which it seems that there are contradictory situations happen in Malaysia. From one pole, there are evidence of a highly tolerated society, whereby from the other pole, the situation is totally opposite.

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I. Introduction

In recent times, the study of religion has become more and more important to every society, state and the world in general. Every day we watch and hear about terrorism acts through media, which directly or indirectly are related to religious beliefs. Researchers in the field of religious studies are working very hard to give answers regarding this matter. They are including social scientists especially sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and religious figures as well. One of the major elements that has been analyzed is toleration. Whether toleration is relevant or irrelevant, or whether it exists or does not exist in our real world, this topic is still very much subject to debate. It is also arguable whether this element is the cause - or the cure - to bring harmony to our world.

II. Toleration- from History to Concepts

The initial attempt towards toleration that is worthy of appreciation even till today is the work of Cyrus the Great of Persia (r.c. 558 – 529 B.C.E). Cyrus the Great made Persia the centre of a mighty new empire with its capital at Ecbatana (currently Hamadan) on the Silk Road (Julian Holland: 1999). He is the key figure who established the foundation for two traditions of toleration. He was praised in the Hebrew Bible for allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem after their captivity at Babylon (Laursen: 2005) . Hinduism has been identified as one of the most tolerant of religions. This proclamation may be true as the Hindu way,

being entirely racial and hereditary, does not have the element of proselytization. Accordingly, it must tolerate alien faiths. The Mohammedan invasion put an end to tolerance in India by introducing cruel persecution of the Hindus and destruction of their temples. When the Mughal empire was established in Delhi, Akhbar, the most famous Mughal emperor, held discourses in his palace every Friday where Brahmans, Buddhists and Parsis expounded their views as freely as Mohammedans (Adeney:1926) . Although Adeney provided historical evidence supporting his argument about Mohammedan rule which cannot be denied, it seems to be focused on a few events only, while ignoring major contributions that Mohammedan rule brought to India.

At the time of the Greeks, the toleration for great varieties of religious beliefs may be attributed to their intellectual breadth, but also to the syncretism, which admitted a plurality of divinities into its pantheon. Accordingly, as Adam remarks:

"There was comparatively little persecution for religious beliefs in Greek antiquity. Religious institutions and ceremonies were carefully guarded; but in respect of dogma the limits of toleration were very wide. We may infer from a remark of the Platonic Socrates that Athenians in general cared little what a man believed, so long as he did not attempt to proselytize. "

The Orphic believers, as the same authority points out, were tolerated since they showed no sign of abstaining from the religious services which the city ordained. The Pythagoreans were attacked because they used their religious organization for political ends. The daring teachings of Socrates had long been tolerated without any interference on the part of the authorities (Adeney: 1926) . Xenophon placed himself in the Greek tradition with his policy of religious toleration. His policy of toleration was toward Medes, Hyrcanians and other religious and ethnic groups in his age (Laursen: 2005).

During the Roman age, it was Roman state policy to allow conquered nations to continue with the practice of their indigenous religious rites, including Jews and Christians. The Jews had the right to practice their religion based on commercial reasons. At first Christians obtained tolerance to practice on account of their Jewish origin. However when they separated, Christians were protected by Roman magistrates and police under The Acts of the Apostles. Although

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49

Christians were protected, Christianity was not a religio licita (the legal status under the Roman era, which means tolerated religion; this position enables adherents to enjoy some privileges such as collecting taxes or exemption from military service). When Trajan ruled the Roman empire, there was a limitation on the Roman policy of toleration whereby Christianity, which had previously been implicitly illegal, become explicitly illegal (Adeney:1926) .

Gallienus brought an end to religious persecution, when he issued a rescript in A.D. 260. This rescript was ordered throughout the world encouraging all who had been in hiding due to religious persecution, to come out of hiding and declared that no one may molest them. Gallienus's rescript has been claimed as the first Roman edict of toleration. However, it does not indicate that Christianity was now made a religio licita. The Edict of Milan was issued throughout the whole empire by Constantine in the year 313. The toleration granted in this edict is absolute and unconditional. It expressly applied to the Christians, for whose benefit it was clearly and primarily intended. But it also included devotees of all other religions as well. Constantine made Christianity not only tolerated but legalized as the religion of the state (Adeney:1926) .

In the very long history of the Roman period, Christianity was discriminated against by the Roman rulers. They did not have the right to practice their faith and beliefs, until the Edict of Milan was issued, whereby Christianity was legalized and made as the religion of the state.

In the medieval age, there was comparatively rare occurrence of persecution until the advent of the Inquisitions in the 13th century. Ecclesiastical, misguided zeal crushed out the spirit of tolerance and persecutions were still happening when Europe entered the Renaissance period. Castellio (1515- 1563), a Frenchman who has been a friend of Calvin (1509-1564) insisted on absolute toleration. He argued that if the end of Christianity be the diffusion of a spirit of beneficence, persecution must be its extreme antithesis. If persecution remains the essential element of religion, that religion must be a curse to mankind (Adeney: 1926)

- In 1689, John Locke published the first Letter Concerning Toleration (Locke 1983) anonymously in Holland in Latin which then was translated into English immediately. It was followed by the Second and Third Letters (Adeney: 1926) . It seems that religious devotees in Greek and Roman ages, and also in European countries before and after the Renaissance had been facing difficulties in practicing their own beliefs. Although this matter has not been fully explored yet, religious persecution is likely to occur in every society. The issue of asserting toleration in society began as early as during the time of the ancient civilizations and it still a pertinent phenomenon until this moment.

III. What is Toleration? a Brief Concept

Toleration and tolerance are two words that can be used interchangeably. The meanings of these two words are similar and it is quite difficult to differentiate between them. These terms have been widely used in debates of social, cultural and religious contexts, beside other scientific contexts such as in medicine. This paper will be discussing further these terms in the context of religion.

According to Adeney (1926) in his toleration entry in the Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, the word 'toleration' in its legal, ecclesiastical and doctrinal application has a peculiarly limited significance. It connotes a refraining from prohibition and persecution. Nevertheless, it suggests a latent disapproval, and it usually refers to a condition in which the freedom, which it permits, is both limited and conditional. Toleration is not equivalent to religious liberty, and it falls far short of religious equality. It assumes the existence of an authority which might have been coercive, but which for reason of its own is not pushed to extremes. It implies a voluntary inaction, a politic leniency.

John Christian Laursen (2005), after a long discussion, concluded that "Toleration is a policy or attitude toward something that is not approved and yet is not actively rejected. The word comes from the Latin tolerare (to bear or endure), suggesting a root meaning of putting up with something. There is no single and widely accepted definition of the term, and it is hardly an exaggeration to say that every author uses it in her own way. Therefore it may be best to understand the many uses of the words in terms of family resemblances."

"It should be clear that each of the languages that uses a variant of the Latin term (e.g. German. Toleranz; Dutch, tolerantie; French, tolerance; Spanish, tolerancia; Italian, tolleranza; ect) adds its own slightly different connotation to the word, based on historical experiences. Languages that do not derive the word from Latin have synonyms, each with some overlap and some differences in usage."

Throughout much of the history of the concept, toleration referred largely to a policy or attitude towards different religions. Intolerance could mean burning at the stake of heretics or apostates and forced conversions of adherent to different religions, and tolerance could mean anything short of that. By the late twentieth century, demand for toleration could also be viewed in reference to other disputed behaviour such as sexual orientations, clothing and dress, drug use, vegetarianism versus meat eating, and more, although religion was often not far behind these disputes. Ethnic and cultural behaviours and language usage could be the subject of tolerance and intolerance as well.

One of the thought-provoking paradoxes of toleration that was posed by Laursen is that if one is

tolerant of everything, then one is also tolerant of the intolerant. This may mean complicity with persecution, or at least failure to prevent it.

Colin Gunton (1996) in his toleration entry in the Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society defined toleration as the virtue of a preparedness to accept for the sake of higher good – especially the well-being of human society – behaviour and convictions that are believed to be mistaken. It implies disapproval of what is tolerated, and distinguished from the personal quality of tolerance by virtue of the fact that it refers to public policy whereby religions, groups or opinions, which are believed to be contrary to official policy or doctrine, are allowed existence. It is superficially paradoxical in theory, apparently involving acquiescence in error and immorality, but can be argued to be necessary for higher reasons such as human freedom to dissent and the value to society of the diversity of opinions. It tends also to be selectively applied in practice because it involves fine judgments about what measure of diversity a society can tolerate without dissolution.

The Roman Empire was considered tolerant of religions. It can be seen from one point that it allowed pluralism of religious practice, but in another aspect, it was repressive and persecuted religions which did not belong on its list of officially approved religions. The discussions of toleration centred on religion in the Western society, especially in the history of Christianity until very recent times.

From this writer's point of view, toleration can be seen from two angles. Firstly from the higher vantage point of an authority that has the decision-making prerogative, power, policy and laws on their hands, and then down to the masses. Whoever has the authority can determine what kind of toleration or which definition they are going to use. In the context of democracy, the majority has the authority over the minority to select and practice tolerance. The second point is from bottom to the top, which represents assertion from individual or minority group facing the authority or majority. Therefore, toleration, which always correlates with religion right from the beginning of human history until recently, is always the confrontation between the majority and minority groups.

In the context of my research, considering a number of definitions that has been discussed before, I can conclude that religious tolerance is an attitude of willingness to allow and accept religious differences to be practiced in any community or country without prejudice even if it is in one's power to reject or deny it, in order to achieve well being and a harmonious society. In this context, the allowance and acceptance of any religious differences does not imply becoming a believer or follower of that particular religion. In other words, anybody is permitted to believe and practice any religion. The power to reject or deny diverse religious beliefs and practices may take any form such as, using

legal authority, political power, religious institution, community pressure, individual action and so on. Also religious tolerance does not mean one views other religions as equally true, but upholds the right of others to practice their beliefs.

IV. Theories Related to Tolerance

Cyrus the Great of Persia led the world to the practice of toleration with the foundation of two traditions of toleration between the Persian Empire and the Jews. Xenophon of Greek had also used his policy of toleration for political ends.

John Wycliffe (1330 – 1384) developed the theory of toleration within his political theory of the king's responsibility to protect the welfare of civilians. Christine de Pisan (1364 – 1430) stressed the interdependence of the various parts of the body to the scenario in politics in order to justify tolerant treatment of differences of gender, class and nationality. Nicholas of Cusa recognized that mankind was inherently and inescapably diverse in language, culture and politics. If there will always be different customs and rites, toleration is justified because persecution is futile. Sebastian Castelleo (1515 – 1563) wrote some of the first sustained defences of toleration in his De haeretics (1555; Concerning heretics).

Thomas Erastus (1524 – 1583) gave his name to Erastianism, a term for state supremacy and policies that enforce toleration in order to maintain political stability and prevent religious fighting.

Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679) who wrote Leviatham (1651) is also credited with a theory of toleration in the ruler's own self interest. Trying to control people's thought may provoke too much opposition and squanders power that can best be used elsewhere. Merchant and Leveller William Walwyn (1600 – 1680) wrote in favor of complete religious toleration on religious grounds.

John Locke's (1632 – 1704) first work on toleration opposed it, but he did a turnaround and developed a theory of toleration which he published in "A Letter Concerning Toleration" (1689). Voltaire (1694 – 1778) also wrote a significant work on toleration in his "A Treatise on Toleration".

Most scholars studied religion from two main perspectives, namely structural functional point of view and conflict perspective. Johnstone, Ronald L. (2001) gives an overview of religion in society from various perspectives such as structural, functional and conflict. There are interesting relations between these theories when we use them to understand religious tolerance. In my assumption, the level of conflict in society will reduce when the level of tolerance increases and vice versa.

After taking into consideration all the above mentioned history, definitions and theories, the central point is that the phenomenon of toleration can be seen

from two different angles. Integral here is the differentiation between the meaning and experience of 'tolerance' practiced by those in authority and those who constitute the masses. Thus, it will be those authority figures in power who determine what kind of 'toleration will be exercised. Therefore, toleration, which always correlates with religion, and started from the beginning of human history and remains relevant until now, is the confrontation between majority and minority.

V. Experience of Tolerance in Malaysia

Malaysia, a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious country, is where people from different parts of the world have made their home in the relatively recent past (Hassan and Basri, 2005). Malaysian leaders have constantly been defending the claim that the level of integration among ethnic groups is relatively high. There are many government policies that have been formulated to increase and sustain ethnic integration such as the New Economy Policy, National Unity Policy and National Education Policy. From all those policies that have been established and implemented, it appears that ethnic based policies been developed to handle ethnic integration. While the government seems overwhelmingly engrossed with the policies regarding national integration, one thing that might be overlooked is that in line with those ethnic based policies, there is a religious based policy. Although many Malaysian leaders claimed that the people are living in harmony, there are a number of cases which happened recently that seem to be cracking that solidarity and need urgent attention especially from the policy makers. National integration issues may not only be catered through ethnic-centered points of view - religious matters also need to be considered. Religious toleration in a multi-religious country is increasingly important. This applies not only in Malaysia but also the rest of the world considering that there are hardly any countries which have only a single religion.

a) Scenario of Toleration

A numbers of scenarios have been explored and analyzed especially by scholars, which can help portray this phenomenon more clearly. Since independence, a number of studies had been carried out on the topic of religious tolerance. According to Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (2001), in the long history of mankind, religion has been the most fundamental source of happiness and the framework for the development of great civilizations. But throughout our history, mankind has been grappling with the problem of differences, whether of religion, socio-economic status, ethnicity, race, language, politics, ideology, gender and even body-weight and size. Unfortunately, religion sometimes has been used, or rather abused to extenuate and justify the discriminatory policies and practices based on various differences. Nevertheless in Malaysia, according

to Wan Azizah, there is a high degree of religious tolerance, and one evidence of this is the "Open house" concept that generally has been practiced among all major ethnic communities during major festivals. Although there are a number who disagree with her statement by saying that such concept is just happen at a surface level only.

A very interesting scenario has been explored by Mohamad Yusof Ismail (2006) regarding the Buddhist minority community who live in the Malay Muslim majority community in Kelantan. The Buddhist community has twenty temples in Kelantan which is noted for its orthodoxy in particular with regards to national politics and local practices of Islam. Based on that research, he concluded that both communities can live in harmony without any unwanted incident being recorded for a very long period. It means that religious tolerance was already practiced and proven in creating harmonious societies, particularly in Kelantan.

According to Zaid Ahmad (2003) it is interesting to track the experiences of ups and downs of inter-religious relations particularly in the post-independence era. The question is why all religions are capable of co-existing without much disconcert. Indeed at this point, we would not be able to measure the level and perhaps to what extent Malaysians practice tolerance in their daily lives.

b) Scenario of Intolerance

In December 7, 2006, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has admitted that race relations in Malaysia are "fragile". This then shows how fragile the situation is among the races. If it is knocked it might shake, but if it is knocked harder it might break, he said according to The Star's report of his speech. Although this statement is about race relations, it is directly connected to inter-religious affairs. This speech was delivered when Malaysia was facing a few issues which challenged the Malaysian constitution regarding religious freedom.

The case of Azlina Jailani or better known as Lina Joy which happened in 2006 drew attention not only in Malaysia but also the rest of the world. She claimed that she had been converted from Islam to Christianity since 1998, having as proof a Baptism Certificate. She had been denied from changing her name and removing the word 'Islam' from her National Registration Identity Card by the National Registration Office of Malaysia. The case was brought up at the Malaysia High Court and Federal Court.

This case has been used by Article 11 Group and Inter-Faith Commission Group (IFC), which claimed to promote a more just practice of religion in Malaysia. The Malay Muslims feel that they have been threatened by these two groups and their supporters and are fearful of losing the Islamic status and privileges in many aspects of their daily life in this country. This scenario is

developing a new dimension in Malaysian inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations.

At the same time The Muslim Organisations in Defence of Islam (PEMBELA) was formed, which brought together more than 50 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). PEMBELA brings Muslims aspirations of defending the status of Islam in the Malaysian constitution from been attacked especially from Article 11 and IFC groups.

In November 2006, a similar case as Lina Joy happened. One Indian Christian individual known as Rayyapan, was converted to Islam in 1990 and got married with a Muslim lady. When he died in November 29, 2006, his former wife, Mary, who was a Christian, demanded to bury her husband's body according to Christian funeral practices but was challenged by Majlis Agama Islam Selangor or MAIS (Selangor Islamic State Council). MAIS claimed that Rayyapan was a Muslim according to their records and that he should be buried according to Islamic funeral practices. This case also created social tension among ethnic groups in Malaysia.

According to Anthony J. Marsella (2005) "Differences, of course, do not mean conflict, and conflict does not mean violence is inevitable" . Chandra Muzaffar (2001) said that there are many parallel values among the different faiths. In other words, as reform-minded women and men reach out to the core elements in their respective religions, they will also invariably connect with common essential values and worldviews embodied in the faith of the other.

VI. Conclusion

All those scenarios, of both tolerance and intolerance, are reflective of the social situation in Malaysia nowadays. It is very certain that the inter-religious ethnic relations are very fragile and uncertain. Therefore, a study is urgently needed in order to examine to what extent inter-religious ethnic relations in Malaysia need tolerance. Such a study has been conducted and the answer for the above question will be shared in another occasion.

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